



ptaviewpoint

by Wendy Enck, PTA, BS

Empowerment Is Yours

Find the right fit. And never settle.

Have you ever wondered if you're where you're supposed to be in your career?

How do you know when you're in a work setting that's perfect for you?

If you would have told me 10 years ago that I was going to be a physical therapist assistant today, I'd have said, "What's a PTA?" I'd never even heard of them, much less aspired to be one.

When I started college I planned to major in health sciences, but in my junior year I switched to sports management. One of the requirements was completing an internship, which took me to the United States Water Fitness Association (USWFA) in Boynton Beach, Florida. I'd always liked activities associated with water, so I hoped that this internship would be a good fit. Little did I know the experience would change my life.

Team HARTZ

The internship with the USWFA required that I learn all about the non-profit educational organization's various programs, which include instruction in aquatic exercise, swimming, competitive swimming, and aquatic therapy. Up to that point, I hadn't known a thing about aquatic therapy; in fact, I'm not sure I even knew such a thing existed. John Spannuth, USWFA's president and chief executive officer, introduced me to physical therapists (PTs) who were working with a diverse group of patients. One day I shadowed a PT who was doing aquatic therapy with a 12-year-old boy who had cystic fibrosis. That's, in a sense, when my career started.

I'll never forget the expression on that young boy's face. He was smiling so brightly it looked as if he could take on the world. He was able to do things in the water he only could dream about doing on land. I went to John and asked him how I could quickly become a part of this wonderful, transformative profession. He recommended that I pursue becoming a PTA.

Six months later I returned to Pennsylvania. I immediately applied to the PTA program at Central Penn College, entering classes there in fall 1999. I learned there were far more components to physical therapy than my Florida experience had shown. I would spend the next year and a half studying all aspects of the profession, but found myself most comfortable in the orthopedic setting.

The year 2001 was a whirlwind. I graduated from school in May, took my board exam in June, and was relieved and excited to find out several weeks later that I'd passed. My first job as a PTA was at NovaCare in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where I'd done my final internship during school. While I liked my coworkers, the hours, and the patients we served, something told me I wouldn't be staying there long. Sure enough, in August I got an intriguing phone call from my old swim team coach, who told me that another of his former swimmers, Brian Hartz, needed help at a private practice orthopedic clinic he'd recently opened in Lititz, Pennsylvania. I started at HARTZ Physical Therapy (yes, the name properly is all caps) on October 8, 2001.

I've been there ever since. I quickly came to feel that HARTZ was a unique

place where I could be part of something special. The level of caring for patients and the commitment to helping them reach their goals was—and is—off the charts. And the relationships among staff couldn't be better. We work in teams. Every time a patient visits, he or she sees the same three people—a PT, a PTA, and a physical therapy aide. Patients get to know their team well, and vice versa. There's none of the impersonality patients too often face in other health care settings.

Inside the clinic, Brian encourages and empowers staff to "be all that we can be." Words and actions convey that PTAs are essential to patients' and the practice's success. But what makes working at HARTZ even better is the togetherness and sense of purpose staff share *outside* the office, as well.

HARTZ has introduced me to community involvement and ingrained in me its importance. From my very first days on staff, I've worked with my "teammates"—the clinic leadership instills that we're a unified force working together toward common goals—on an array of community events. For example, we've staffed local fundraising races, participated in parades, served meals at a mission, and wrapped Christmas gifts to be given to children with disabilities.

By far our biggest community event is the 5-year-old HARTZ Physical Therapy Fall Blast 5K Run/WalkRun, which has raised tens of thousands of dollars for local charities, and also promotes the importance, for people of all ages, of physical exercise and activity. We average about 300 runners and walkers annually. It amazes me every year how good I feel on that October

morning. I meet wonderful people from the community, and I feel such pride in HARTZ's role.

In January of this year I added a new phase to my career, becoming Pennsylvania's representative to APTA's PTA Caucus. This experience has opened my eyes to an entirely new arena of involvement and activity—advocating for my fellow PTAs and the profession of physical therapy at both the state and federal levels. Now I truly feel I am an important part of our profession's future, in addition to its present. I give so much credit to my boss and colleagues at HARTZ Physical Therapy for encouraging my advocacy role—and also for their support earlier this year as I sought and attained Recognition of Advanced Proficiency for the Physical Therapist Assistant in musculoskeletal physical therapy.

Go For It

So, do you want to know what I've learned from my experiences as a PTA? When you're looking for an environment that's the right fit for you, start by choosing an employer that shares your beliefs and values. Determine that you'll be encouraged and supported in pursuing professional and personal growth.

Next, ask if the employer is willing to help you financially to become a member of APTA and your state chapter. Then—this next part is extremely important—*get involved* in helping ensure a bright future for PTAs and the profession! Go to www.apta.org and your state chapter's Web site to read up on the issues we face and how they're being addressed. Get the names of your district representatives, PTA special interest group (SIG) chair, and PTA Caucus representative, and contact them with questions or concerns you may have. If a Caucus position is vacant, consider running for it yourself.

I want every PTA to feel as happy and empowered as I do, and to share my sense

of pride in my role in the clinic, community, and profession. Ask the right questions and refuse to settle for anything less than achieving your potential, and such feelings of fulfillment are within your grasp. It's never too early or too late to get started! Whether you're still in school or employed

and discontented, the time to focus on your bright future is now. **PT**

Wendy Enck, PTA, BS, is employed at HARTZ Physical Therapy in Lititz, Pennsylvania, and is a 2008 recipient of Recognition of Advanced Proficiency for the Physical Therapist Assistant in musculoskeletal physical therapy.